

Libby residents appeal for cleanup fund

By CHRISTOPHER THORNE
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Fearing a delay in the cleanup of the toxic asbestos spread through their former mining town, citizens from Libby are appealing to Congress to renew a special industry tax that supplies cash

for the Superfund trust fund.

The trust fund, which is overseen by the Environmental Protection Agency, fell from a high of \$3.6 billion six years ago to what is projected to be about \$28 million at the end of next year.

People who live in towns

Senate hearing on Superfund today

affected by toxic waste sites, like the mining town of Libby, say a lack of funds may drag out plans to clean up toxins in the ground, the air and the water.

The Senate will hear testimony today from EPA officers,

environmentalists and people who live near Superfund sites on the issue of funding Superfund cleanup sites.

In a letter mailed last month to the Montana delegation, the 20-member Citizen's Advisory Group of Libby asked the law-

makers to renew the tax on industries that handle oil, chemicals

and other toxins. That tax expired in 1995, and ever since the amount of money in the Superfund trust fund has dwindled.

"Without a consistent and reliable funding source for

Superfund, cleanup activities in Libby will be at the mercy of congressional appropriations," the group wrote in a March 13 letter to Rep. Denny Rehberg, R-Mont., and Sens. Max Baucus, D-Mont., and Conrad Burns, R-Mont.

Aides to the delegation

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Libby residents lobby for tax to finance Superfund

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members avoided any direct commitment to the special tax on industry. Aides to Burns and Rehberg said they hadn't seen the letter yet.

They all said the trio were dedicated to resolving the widespread asbestos poisoning

at Libby. The asbestos is traced to the now defunct vermiculite that was operated by W.R. Grace & Co. mine. The vermiculite ore contained harmful tremolite asbestos, which has been linked to deaths and sickness in the town.

The number of toxic waste sites being cleaned up around

the nation has also fallen. Last month, EPA chief Christie Whitman defended the reductions in the number of toxic sites being cleaned, and questioned the wisdom of reimposing the Superfund tax.

"One of the concerns that I know the president has had

about the way the Superfund tax is imposed is that it's not all on polluters," Whitman said in testimony before a House Appropriations subcommittee. "It is on everyone in an industry, so that even those that have the best of environmental records are also paying."

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